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ABSTRACT

The results of a National Institute of Education research project indicate that despite their key roles in making schools effective, principals are chosen in a process "ridden with chance" and are frequently selected because of their "images" rather than for their qualities as educational leaders. Vacancy announcements are rarely publicized widely and those charged with making selections are frequently unaware of the qualifications pertinent to the position being filled. Teachers most likely to move up the career ladder into administrative positions are those who call attention to themselves by accepting responsibilities outside the classroom and then pursue formal administrative training. Districts working to improve their principal selection processes tend to recruit candidates, actively develop potential principals, write job descriptions specific to each position, and rely less heavily than other districts on the superintendent's judgments. In addition to reviewing the findings of the research project, this report notes where further information can be obtained. (PGD)

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RESEARCH IN BRIEF

February 1984

Selecting Principals

One of the key players in the field of education is the principal – the man or woman in the middle, the one responsible for seeing to it that his or her school is an effective one.

Yet a National Institute of Education (NIE) research project indicates that these key players are chosen in a process "ridden with chance," and a principal frequently is chosen because of his or her "image" rather than educational leadership qualities.

This study on how principals are selected is especially timely because nearly half of the nation's school principals are now between the ages of 55 and 65 and will retire in the next two decades.

Principal selection usually begins with a vacancy announcement -- yet these vacancies often are announced to a small audience, are not specific about which schools have openings, and the number of individuals applying is rather small compared with the number of teachers who are qualified to become principals.

Those responsible for selecting principals told NIE researchers they want the best school leaders possible, but none could say exactly what basic training or experience was required for the job. In fact, very few offered any connection between the vacancy and the necessary qualifications, for example requiring teaching and administrative experience at the grade levels of the vacancy. Often, how well an applicant fit into the community was more important than his qualifications.

This doesn't mean that good candidates never enter the race or that good principals are never chosen. It simply means that when merit and equity win out, it is frequently due to chance or just the right combination of circumstances at a given moment.

NIE researchers found that the typical candidate for principal is a teacher or coach (especially at the high school level) who, through willingness to stay after school, handle discipline and serve on committees, comes to the attention of the supervising principal. This teacher then indicates he or she is interested in becoming a principal and begins moving up the career ladder by returning to college for administrative certification, learning management roles, becoming an assistant principal or vice principal, head teacher, etc.

Although most school districts have a committee screen job applicants, the final decision on who to choose rests with the superintendent, who puts his or her own reputation on the line when recommending a candidate to the school board.

NIE researchers also studied several districts working to improve the way principals are chosen. These districts actively recruited and developed potential principals so when vacancies did occur there was a sizable number of applicants. They also provided specific job descriptions letting candidates know exactly what was expected of them. Likewise, these districts relied heavily on the whole selection process rather than depending on the superintendent's judgment. By taking such steps, they were able to develop strong potential principals prepared to work toward the district's educational goals.

The project concludes with recommendations for communities that want to strengthen the way principals are chosen in their school districts. Copies of the 65-page report, "Selecting School Principals: A Sourcebook for Educators" is available from Publications, National Institute of Education, 1200 -19th Street, N. W., Washington, D. C. 20208. For more information contact Laurie Maxwell, 202/254-5800 or Kay McKinney, 202/254-5740.

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